Returning to the One: An Anthropological and Comparative Study of Nirvāṇa and Jannah as Culturally Distinct Visions of the Same Ultimate Reality

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Introduction

Across the world's spiritual traditions, descriptions of the final human destiny—Mokṣa, Nirvāṇa, Jannah, the Tao, Fanā', the Great Void (*Suwung*)—appear remarkably diverse on the surface. Yet beneath these linguistic differences lies a shared intuition about a single, unchanging, eternal Real that stands beyond the flux of the phenomenal world.

This universal intuition emerges with clarity in the early Buddhist *Udāna* 8.3, which speaks of "the Unborn, the Unmade, the Unconditioned," and in the Islamic *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, which affirms a God who "neither begets nor is begotten" and who is utterly incomparable to anything in creation. Both texts point to a non-contingent Absolute—a reality that is not a product of causes and conditions.

Different civilizations describe the journey toward this Absolute in ways shaped by their linguistic symbols, cultural psychology, economic life, and metaphysical temperament. Among Brahmanical societies—philosophical, speculative, metaphysically oriented—the apex is expressed as *Nirvāṇa* or *Mokṣa*: a release from rebirth through insight into the non-self (*anattā*). Among Arabian merchant societies—empirical, pragmatic, socially structured—the destiny is symbolized as *Jannah*: a garden of peace, prosperity, and ultimate nearness to God.

For mystics of both traditions, however, the surface symbolism dissolves. Sufis affirm that the ultimate return is not sensual paradise but *liqa' Allāh* (the meeting with God), echoing the Qur'anic call: *"O tranquil soul, return to your Lord…"* (Q 89:27–30). Buddhist arahants similarly realize that Nirvāṇa is not annihilation but the direct encounter with *asaṅkhata-dhātu*, the deathless element.

Thus, from an anthropological and phenomenological standpoint, Nirvāṇa and Jannah can be understood as culturally inflected representations of the same metaphysical destination—the return of consciousness to its ultimate ground.

Ultimate Reality in Udāna 8.3 and Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ

The Unconditioned in Udāna 8.3

Udāna 8.3 is perhaps the most explicitly metaphysical statement in the Pāli Canon:

"There is, monks, that which is unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned (ajāta, abhūta, akata, asaṅkhata). Were there not that which is unborn... escape from the born, the become, the made, the conditioned would not be possible."

This passage establishes three crucial philosophical points:

1. The conditioned world (*saṅkhata*) is in perpetual flux.
2. Liberation requires a reality outside this flux.
3. Such an Unconditioned truly exists and is the basis for salvation.

This is not “nothingness,” but rather a positive, transcendent, non-contingent Real akin to the metaphysical Absolute in other traditions.

The Absolute in Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ

Islam’s most concise metaphysical statement is Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ:

“He is Allah, the One;
Allah the Eternal Refuge;
He neither begets nor is begotten;
And there is nothing comparable to Him.”

Like Udāna 8.3, this text asserts:

- Absoluteness (the One, self-sufficient).
- Non-derivation (not born, not produced).
- Incomparability (beyond form, concept, likeness).

Thus, both traditions affirm:

- A non-born reality.
- Beyond causation.
- Beyond anthropomorphism.
- The ground of liberation.

Although articulated differently—one in philosophical-phenomenological language, the other in theological-monotheistic language—they gesture toward the same unconditioned Real.

Two Paths Toward the Same Real: Buddhist Meditation and Islamic Devotion

Buddhist Path: Emptying the Illusory Self

Meditation (*bhāvanā*) in Buddhism is the systematic dismantling of delusion. The self is seen as a bundle of impermanent processes (*khandha*), none of which qualifies as an eternal essence. Insight into this reveals *anattā*—the absence of inherent self. When delusion falls, the mind awakens to the Unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*), beyond birth and death.

This process is not nihilism. It is a return—the cognitive dissolution of illusion so that consciousness can converge with the deathless element.

This is reminiscent of the Javanese mystical notion of Suwung—the emptiness that is full, the void that reveals the Ground.

Islamic Path: Focusing the Heart on al-Haqq

In Islam, the journey is not through analytic deconstruction of the self but through focusing consciousness on al-Haqq, “the Real,” one of the divine names. Worship (*ʿibādah*) purifies the nafs (ego-self):

- *nafs ammārah* (the commanding ego, full of passion),
- *nafs lawwāmah* (the self-accusing conscience),

- until
- *nafs muṭma'innah* (the tranquil soul, Q 89:27).

Through remembrance (*dhikr*), prayer (*ṣalāh*), surrender (*islām*), and love of God, the worshipper empties the ego—not through analyzing its components but through orienting it toward the Real.

This leads to *fanā'* (ego-dissolution) and *baqā'* (abiding in God), concepts parallel to Nirvāṇa and the deathless element.

Thus Buddhism empties the self from within, Islam empties the self by turning it toward the Real. Different methods, same destination.

Anthropological and Linguistic Perspectives: Why Nirvāṇa and Jannah Appear Different

Brahmanical Culture: Philosophical, Metaphysical Orientation

Ancient India, especially among the Brahminical elite, favored:

- metaphysical speculation,
- contemplative practice,
- renunciation,
- cosmic cycles,
- liberation from rebirth.

In such a milieu, the highest goal is naturally described in philosophical and contemplative language:

- cessation of craving,
- extinction of ignorance,
- realization of non-self,
- merging with the deathless.

Thus, *Nirvāṇa* is framed as an ontological breakthrough.

Arabian Merchant Culture: Empirical, Pragmatic Orientation

Pre-Islamic Arabia valued:

- survival,
- trade,
- contracts,
- honor,
- family,
- material stability.

To such a society, metaphysical abstractions alone had little cultural traction.
Thus, revelation expresses paradise in sensory symbols familiar to desert people:

- gardens,
- rivers,
- shade,
- companionship,
- security.

But the Qur'an also repeatedly emphasizes:

- *ridwān Allāh* — God's pleasure,
- *liqā' Allāh* — meeting God,
- *ilā rabbihā nāẓirah* — faces gazing toward their Lord (Q 75:22–23).

For the spiritually advanced—such as the Sufis—Jannah's sensory imagery is not the final goal. The real destiny is *the return to the Real*: *inna lillāhi wa inna ilayhi rājiʿūn*.

Thus, Jannah can be anthropologically understood as a symbolic waypoint tailored to the pragmatic consciousness of early Arabian society, while the ultimate return—union with the Real—is the same destination as Nirvāṇa.

Mystical Convergence: Anattā and "The Tranquil Soul"

When Buddhism says the self is empty (*anattā*), this does not mean nihilism but the discovery of a deeper ground. When Islam says:

"O tranquil soul (nafs muṭma'innah), return to your Lord…" (Q 89:27),

it echoes the same movement of consciousness away from egoic illusion toward the Real.

Thus:

- *anattā* is the dissolution of the ego's false claim to inherent existence.
- *nafs muṭma'innah* is the ego pacified, surrendered, transparent to God's presence.

Both describe the same spiritual psychology with different metaphors.

Nirvāṇa and Jannah as Two Images of Returning to the Same Ultimate Reality

From a comparative and anthropological standpoint:

- Nirvāṇa = realization of the deathless, unconditioned, the Real beyond birth and death.
- Jannah = symbolic representation of the soul's perfect peace, culminating in nearness to God.

For mystics, both lead to the same goal:

Returning to the Source.
Returning to the Real.
Returning to the Unborn.

Nirvāṇa is not annihilation; Jannah is not hedonism.
Each is a culturally shaped symbol of the journey home.

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